

# School's Punishments for Kids Upsets Parents



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*Parents of students in Portland, Oregon, are upset about “community service” discipline, which has kids doing clean-up chores. Photo by Michael H/Photodisc/Getty Images.*

An elementary school in Portland, Oregon, has put a controversial approach to discipline on hold after **parents complained** that it caused their kids to feel “humiliated.”

The “community service” program, called off at the César Chávez K through 8 school while the Portland Public Schools district investigates, reportedly punished misbehaving kids for unruliness (such as throwing food) by having them do chores that included picking up trash from hallways and paper towels from bathroom floors. But that didn’t sit well with some parents.

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“My son has been humiliated and he’s frightened to go to school, and he feels sorry and has some esteem issues. I just don’t think that’s right,” Jeff Hagadorn, the father of a first grader, **told KPTV**. He noted, “I feel like if a student gets in trouble I’m fine with him having detention or having extra school work.”

***STORY: Dad Upset Over ‘Anti-Republican’ Homework Assignment***

However, Christine Miles, a spokesperson for Portland Public Schools, tells Yahoo Parenting that the aim is to offer consequences that are alternatives to punishments including suspensions, expulsions, and extra homework assignments because research has shown those options are ineffective and have negative consequences. She also stresses that while the district widely uses community-service discipline, the methods in question have been temporarily put on hold at César Chávez in order to ensure it’s being used appropriately.

“We’re trying to see if the chores match the discipline,” Miles explains. “If they make a mess, they have to clean it up. If they hurt someone, they have to apologize. If they are involved in a food fight, then part of the discipline is to correct their behavior by them cleaning it up — but if they’re being instructed to instead be cleaning up the restrooms,

that's not okay.”

Jeremy Finn, an education professor and discipline expert at the [University of Buffalo Graduate School of Education](#), tells Yahoo Parenting that, while he's not familiar with the specific program in Portland, it sounds like it has the potential to be effective. “Community service is a method of discipline used by the courts all the time, and it always seemed like a good one to me,” he says. “It gives students the chance to make up for what they did while keeping them in school — and anything that gets them back in school is good.”

Some of the confusion about what's being carried out at the school in question, Miles adds, may stem from the fact that several schools in the Portland district have been participating in trainings for “restorative justice” discipline. It's an approach gaining a foothold at schools nationally, and aims to foster more open, meaningful relationships among students and teachers as an alternative to “zero tolerance” policies such as suspension and expulsion. While the César Chávez school is not one of the six in the district that has been using the method, Miles notes, an administrator from the school has attended the training program; part of the investigation will be to examine whether the school has been putting it into action prematurely or inappropriately.

And while the superintendent has not made a public statement on the situation, local paper [Willamette Week](#) interviewed candidates for the upcoming school board election on the issue, and most agreed that doling out chores that matched the misbehavior was appropriate — especially if it meant providing an alternative to excluding kids from school. But they agreed on another point, too, as articulated by candidate Bobbie Regan: “It should never be a shaming activity.”

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WASHINGTON -- As members of the Senate hurried out of town Wednesday ahead of a major snowstorm, Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) quietly introduced a bill that could help keep tens of thousands of young people in the classroom and out of the juvenile justice system.

The Keep Kids in School Act, introduced Wednesday, aims to reduce the number of kids suspended from U.S. schools each year by encouraging school districts to collect detailed information about disciplinary practices and by providing additional resources to school systems struggling with high suspension rates.

"Over the course of one school year, the number of children suspended could fill the seats at [Pittsburgh Steelers stadium] Heinz Field nearly 54 times," Casey said in a statement, referring to the nearly 3.5 million students nationwide who were suspended from school in 2012, the most recent year for which data are available. "This legislation will give more schools the tools they need to keep children in the place that is most likely to lead to a successful life: the classroom."

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▶ The bill is the latest piece of a nationwide movement to reform what are known as zero-tolerance discipline practices, which typically mandate harsh punishments for even minor violations of school rules, like breaking dress code and being tardy. Casey's proposal also comes amid a growing [body of research](#) showing that suspensions often disproportionately impact minority and disabled students, and that students who are suspended are more likely to drop out of school before graduating.

More than a dozen educational advocacy groups have already backed Casey's bill, including the American Federation of Teachers and the National Council of La Raza.

"When students of color and students with disabilities commit the same offense as others, they are far more likely to be suspended, expelled, subject to physical punishment, and referred to the police," Wade Henderson, the president and CEO of The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, an umbrella group of American civil rights organizations, said in a statement Thursday.

"These disparities start a vicious cycle for these students, who fall further behind in class time, suffer from lower self-esteem, and then either drop out or land in the criminal justice system," he continued. "Passage of the Keep Kids in School Act would be an important step forward in on the path to narrowing this deep-seated disparity and toward creating a more equitable education system."

As of Friday, the Keep Kids in School Act had yet to garner any cosponsors, but a Casey spokesman said, "Senator Casey is hoping to include this legislation in the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and we're hopeful this is legislation will quickly gain bipartisan support."

The bill could face early opposition from conservatives in both chambers, who oppose any extension of the federal government's role in education policy. But as Republicans and Democrats increasingly find common ground on efforts to reform the nation's criminal justice system -- starting with changes to mandatory minimum sentencing laws -- bills like Casey's could offer lawmakers a new avenue through which to help keep kids out of what's frequently viewed as a virtual pipeline that all too often runs from the principal's

office to the criminal justice system.

In the meantime, cities and states across the country are testing new ways to keep troubled kids in school longer -- and out of the juvenile justice system.

Before new laws went into effect in Texas in late 2013, students in the state could be ticketed by police with a Class C misdemeanor for breaking school rules. In the first half of last year, [there was a 71 percent drop](#) in the number of tickets issued to students by public school police officers.

In Chicago Public Schools, nearly a decade of zero-tolerance discipline practices [are slowly being phased out](#) and replaced with new models, like student juries, which aim to keep kids in school while holding them responsible for their actions. In 2014, Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel announced that student suspension rates [had fallen 36 percent](#) over the past three years. Suspension, he said, "happens so much less frequently, which also results in more kids on track to graduate and go on to higher education."

# Los Angeles school suspensions drop as students talk out their problems

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.25.15

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In this photo taken Dec. 15, 2014, high school students attend a circle session at restorative justice class at the Augustus F. Hawkins High School in Los Angeles. At Los Angeles Unified School District, the suspension rate has dropped from 8 percent in 2008 to 1.5 percent last school year. Photo: AP/Damian Dovarganes

LOS ANGELES — Two times in the last three years, Marcquees Banks has been taken out of class for getting into fights. He was even sent to another school.

The third time he got into a scuffle, something different happened: A counselor at Augustus Hawkins High School in South Los Angeles pulled Banks and the other teen aside and told them they needed to talk.

With the teens seated face to face, Joseph Luciani asked them to explain why they had fought and how they felt.

## **Restorative Justice Policy**

The school's new approach to discipline, which is known as restorative justice, is catching on in other school districts as well. It focuses less on suspensions, and more on students working out their differences with counselors.

"I realized we had a lot of similarities," said Banks, 17, talking of the student he had been fighting with. Banks said his father is involved in a gang and his mother is jobless.

At Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second largest, the shift has been major. During the 2006-2007 school year, students were scolded with 74,765 days of suspension; last year, they received 8,351, an 89-percent decrease.

The decline comes as many schools around the country are moving toward discipline measures that support students, and rolling back tough policies put in place after the deadly Columbine High School shootings in Colorado. That incident in 1999 prompted many U.S. schools to adopt zero tolerance policies that emphasize harsh discipline for even minor misbehavior.

## **Talking Things Out**

In a letter to school districts last year, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan urged administrators to move away from punishing students by removing them from class.

In Los Angeles, the school board has announced that by 2020 every school must use restorative justice to deal with disciplinary problems. Restorative justice was first used in criminal cases and is now being implemented in a number of large school districts.

The new approach cultivates communication between teachers and students, who gather in weekly circles to discuss concerns. One-on-one "harm circles" are formed between students, parents and counselors when conflicts arise.

Los Angeles, in particular, will be a case study showing just how well the approach works, and whether it can be broadly applied.

## **Will It Work?**

One of the biggest debates concerning restorative justice is over how to measure success.

Looking at suspension rates is one way, said Howard Zehr, who has been studying restorative justice since the 1970s, but there are other, perhaps more important markers that are much harder to measure. They include things like how well children come to understand each other.

Skeptics fear that forcing schools to reduce suspensions will make teachers afraid to suspend anyone, no matter what they do.

"I worry about it going to the other extreme," said education expert Michael Petrilli. He said he fears "a situation in which there's very few or zero suspensions" and "schools become unruly places."

## **Training Teachers, Building Trust**

Augustus Hawkins High School was opened in 2012, in a poor and rough neighborhood with a lot of gang activity.

Principal Claudia Rojas said she is determined to increase achievement levels at the school, which is in one of LA's poorest areas.

During her first year, Rojas and the school's two other principals issued a lot of suspensions — then, they began looking for alternatives.

The school hired Joseph Luciani, who has studied conflict and peace-building, to train teachers how to use restorative justice.

Teachers were instructed to first work on building trust by gathering students weekly and asking questions about their lives. Students talked about relatives that had been killed by gun violence or deported to another country.

## **Suspensions Drop**

When a student acted out, teachers would try to handle the situation in class, and if that failed to work, they would then send the student to a counselor. If students still continued to cause trouble, they would be sent to the principals and, if truly necessary, suspended.

At the program Rojas runs, suspensions dropped 44 percent the next year.

Those numbers parallel declines seen in schools across the district. One school has had just one suspension since 2012, while another has had none since 2010.

However, some also wonder: If students are not being suspended, how are they being held accountable? Zehr said the accountability comes in students having to take responsibility for their actions and the people they harmed by speaking with them directly.

## **Support Network Needed**

Some critics point out that while schools like Augustus Hawkins have a full-time restorative justice counselor, most do not.

"They feel they're just being told not to suspend or not expel," Alex Caputo-Pearl said, speaking of teachers in schools without counselors. She's president of United Teachers Los Angeles, a union group representing teachers. "There's not a support network around them to get help for students or get help for themselves."

Now a junior, Banks said he has begun thinking differently about his future. He said he always thought he would end up in jail, because that is what others seemed to expect of him.

Now, he wants to be a counselor.